Subscription-Based Ticketing: An Exploration of Season Ticket Holder Perceptions

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As professional sports organizations seek to secure a new generation of ticket buyers, one approach teams have initiated is through subscription-based ticket sales. Similar to Netflix, buyers pay a monthly subscription fee to gain unlimited access to a sport team’s product - tickets to home games. The Atlanta Braves, early adopters of this concept, offer the Braves Monthly Pass, a subscription-based service for $39/month. Fans have the option to receive tickets to any home game based on availability on the game day. While this concept has only been fully implemented by a handful of professional sports teams, early evidence suggests this model appeals to a wide range of sport fans (Thron, 2016; Bauernfeind, 2017; Sanborn, 2018), and thus could change the way in which teams market ticket packages in the future.

In a recent SportsBusiness Journal opinion editorial, Bill Sutton (2015) reimagined the frequency escalator sales concept (first introduced by Mullin, Hardy, & Sutton in 1993) in a call-to-action aimed at professional sports organizations. He surmised that perhaps an elevator, not an escalator, was the correct metaphor for the modern sport sales process: “The elevator is about personalization and customization for buyers, as they can establish their own level for monetary and time expenditures. As customization is available to consumers in almost every facet of their lives, why should sports be any different?” (Sutton, 2015). Sutton’s updated model is evident in the concept of subscription-based ticketing, which provides fans with customization and flexibility in how they utilize their ticket packages. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore season ticket holder perceptions of subscription-based ticketing models in hopes of developing a framework for sales practitioners.

A qualitative, focus group methodology is being used for this study. Study participants are season-ticket holders of a Midwestern minor league hockey team from the United States Hockey League. Two focus groups consisting of 6 participants each will be utilized to collect descriptive and qualitative data. The focus groups are scheduled for the end of February, 2019. The researchers will use a short survey to collect demographic information followed by open-ended questions to assess participant perceptions of subscription-based ticketing models, the antecedents and consequences of using the model, and likelihood to subscribe.

In order to analyze the focus group transcripts, two cycles of coding will occur. In order to organize and identify overarching pieces of text, structural coding will occur during the first cycle (Saldana, 2009). During the second cycle of coding, categorical aggression will be conducted in an attempt to identify specific instances and/or quotations that are relevant to the study purpose (Stake, 1995). During this stage, a list of categories will be identified and later summarized into key themes which will provide an analytic framework. The information provided by this study could prove useful for sales practitioners interested in developing, marketing, and ultimately selling subscription-based tickets. Full results and implications will be available at the conference.